

ARTICLE APPEARED IN
PAGE 4/3

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Execution in the Jungle

The victim dug his own grave, scooping the dirt out with his hands. Squatting in the hole, he ate some dry powdered milk, and then lay down to die. No one gagged him. But he didn't scream. He crossed himself. Then a contra executioner knelt and rammed a k-bar knife into his throat. A second enforcer stabbed at his jugular, then his abdomen. When the corpse was finally still, the contras threw dirt over the shallow grave—and walked away.

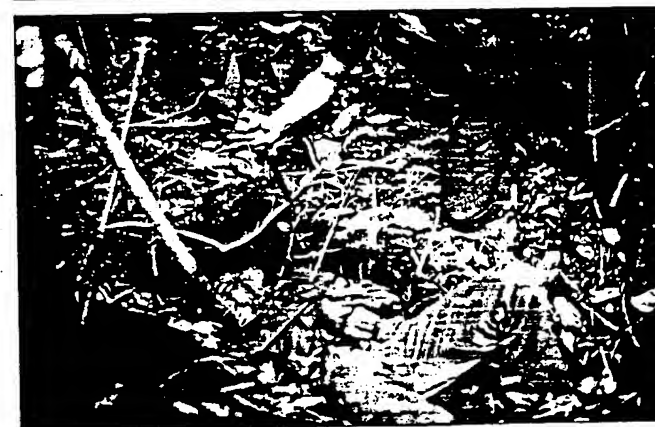
The execution, on Jan. 7 just inside Nicaragua, summoned up other grisly images, such as Police Chief Nguyen Ngoc Loan's shooting of a Viet Cong lieutenant on a Saigon street in 1968. "We have absolutely no knowledge of such an incident," said FDN spokesman Frank Arana in Tegucigalpa. "Something of that nature could have happened, but it does not represent official FDN policy." An eyewitness said FDN guerrillas told him the

dead man had been a spy for the Sandinista security apparatus. They accused the man of reporting rebel locations and informing on civilians who sold food to the contras; they said such civilians had been killed or taken away by the Sandinistas. The contras took the man into the jungle and tied him to a tree. The next

day they killed him—before the camera of a U.S. student.

Frank Wohl, 21, a conservative activist from Northwestern University, had been traveling with the contras as a noncombatant for nearly four months. The rebels, he argued, had to kill or abandon their prisoner, since guerrillas on the run cannot maintain POW camps. The executioners used a knife instead of shooting their victim because Sandinistas were patrolling the neighboring mountain. "With my 200-millimeter lens, I could clearly see them," he remembers. "There were about 20 of them."

At first, Wohl recalls, he didn't believe the contras were going to kill the prisoner. ("He was so calm.") But when Wohl saw him digging the grave, he asked the contras if he could take pictures. "If we had let him go, he would have disclosed our position—and I would have been killed, too," Wohl said. "The Sandinistas would have loved to shoot me—an American—and claim that I was a mercenary." Wohl escaped. The body count in Central America rose by one.



PHOTOS BY FRANK WOHL—STCMA